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## DETROIT

# How Detroit hopes to save the decimated Delray neighborhood

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*Detroit* — Doug Knighten's neighborhood is a shell of what it once was.

The site of the elementary school he attended as a child is now a vacant, overgrown field, and the house on Vanderbilt where he grew up burned down years ago.

"It's like a ghost town compared to what it was," he said. "It was alive, this is dead. They let us go to ruin."

Still, Delray is home for Knighten, who said he's determined to make the best of it.

"There's a lot of good people still around," added Knighten, 33. "I wouldn't want to be nowhere else."

After more than a half-century of neglect, the industrialized southwest Detroit community in the footprint of the under-construction \$4.4 billion Gordie Howe International Bridge is finally getting attention. The city is in the midst of what's believed to be the first planning effort of its kind to help define Delray's future with a mix of development to spur jobs and amenities for its long haulers.

The Delray Neighborhood Framework Plan launched in October 2019, and Detroit Planning and Development Department central region design director Kevin Schronce said it's admittedly not about long-term residential growth.

"This is more about how we can position the residents and the neighborhood to take advantage of the opportunities we think are going to come on the heels of the bridge," he said. "There will be some illustrative ideas of how we think the neighborhood can coexist with these two way different uses of long-term residents — people who have chosen to stay and want to stay in the neighborhood — and new investment through nonresidential uses."

City planning officials recruited Detroit-based architecture and planning firm Rossetti and Philadelphia-based urban design firm Interface Studio for the project, which has called for door-to-door resident surveys to find out what Delray might look like during and after the bridge's construction.

The plan will include an economic development proposal, land assembly strategy and financing options for "an industrial, logistic, and flexible office use corridor," according to Rossetti's project description, as well as an assessment of open spaces, traffic patterns and landscape buffering options.

## **Funding family relocation**

The neighborhood near Zug Island has become increasingly sparse as hundreds of structures, thousands of trees and massive swaths of debris have been cleared in recent years to make way for the Detroit side of the bridge — which is set to be completed by 2024.

Detroit's City Council approved a set of agreements in 2017 with protections for the community that borders what's considered Michigan's most polluted, 48217 ZIP code.

The deal allocated \$45 million for programs that offer health monitoring, home repairs and job training.

The majority of the funding, \$32.6 million, was directed toward assisting residents with relocating to other parts of the city through the Bridging Neighborhoods Program, established as part of the deal to oversee home swaps and environmental mitigation. Other former residents had their properties bought out during the eminent domain process for the bridge.

So far, 43 families have moved to renovated homes in a half-dozen neighborhoods on the east side, west side and other sections of southwest Detroit. Work is underway to move 20 more applicants, said Rico Razo, deputy director of Bridging Neighborhoods.

A little more than \$9 million of the funds for the home swap and environmental mitigation program have been used. The program money will remain available until it is exhausted.

Randall Smith said his family was offered other properties in Warrendale and nearby Mexicantown, but they declined. So did most of his neighbors on Lyon Street, he said.

"It's a nice little neighborhood and we really don't want to leave," said Smith, 32, a life-long resident. "This is probably the safest part of Detroit. ... We don't want to move out of our safe

neighborhood to move into a more dangerous neighborhood."

Once a home to Native American burial mounds, and later an independent village of the same name, Delray was annexed into Detroit in 1906. It became the city's "Hungarian Village," a historic community on the Detroit River, next to Historic Fort Wayne, known for the large immigrant community that settled there.

But over time, Delray was dismantled by industrialization, pollution and gangs because "nobody was watching the crime rate and disinvestment over decades," said Karen Dybis, an author and citizen archivist.

At its height in the 1930s, the community had about 23,000 residents and was considered among the city's most densely populated. Later that decade, the Detroit opened a large sewage treatment plant, expanded in 1957, that decimated portions of the neighborhood. Parts that weren't being razed for the plant were being demolished for the construction of Interstate 75, which effectively cut the neighborhood off from much of the rest of the city.

The most recent U.S. Census Bureau figures placed the population near 2,000. Delray has a median income of \$27,811, and 43% of the residents live below the poverty level.

The surrounding area is underpopulated and home to scrapyards, the largest sewage treatment plant in North America and the Marathon Petroleum Co. refinery.

The city for decades, Dybis said, "perpetuated and participated in the destruction" of the community that dates back to the 1850s, deciding "it is the dumpster of Detroit."

"The city literally dumped everything it hates into one neighborhood," said Dybis, who was awarded grant funding to compile a searchable archive of Delray history. "Now, (with the bridge) it has a chance in a weird way. Is this the renaissance that actually might make Delray?"

## **'They want to stay'**

Detroit City Councilwoman Raquel Castaneda-Lopez represents southwest Detroit and said Delray has been a priority since she got elected. The Delray study wasn't part of the community benefits agreement, but her office pressed for it.

Those discussions, she said, also resulted in a truck traffic study that's expected to wrap up in January with a final report and recommendations.

"There's just an assumption about Delray unfortunately that it's so undesirable that people don't want to live there. That's just not the case," Castaneda-Lopez said. "People want more investment in their community. They want to stay and because they want to stay, they want to see more support."

Razo said with prior mayoral administrations there was a lot of talk and not a lot of action about Delray. But the Duggan administration, he said, has plans in place and is acting on them.

"That's all any resident ever wants," said Razo, a former Department of Neighborhoods district manager for Detroit.

Detroiters Working for Environmental Justice is one of several organizations that has worked with the city's consulting team and Southwest Detroit Community Benefits Coalition on neighborhood engagement.

Delray has long been subjected to air pollution from nearby industries and exhaust from trucking on Interstate 75, said Brad Ashburn, communications manager for Detroiters Working for Environmental Justice.

"Our mission was to make sure that the people had a voice at the table. They've had a lot of issues," Ashburn said. "What they are going to face going forward is the same, except more truck traffic."

Detroit's planning office and the consulting team have conducted two door-to-door canvassing efforts and a couple of community meetings since October 2019, hitting close to 350 houses in the planning study zone, said Schronce.

## **Changed landscape**

Making connections hasn't been a simple task. Bridging Neighborhoods conducted a canvass in a separate area north of I-75, targeting 438 homes. That team walked 369 of them and determined 283 appeared to be occupied. Out of those, 32% — or 91 households — answered the door, Razo said.

Three years into the relocation program, he said, there are still residents who didn't know about the relocation program despite mailers, door knockers and other initiatives.

Outreach for the framework plan were slowed by COVID-19. Detroit's council in November granted an extension for the planning project, moving the December deadline to

March 2021.

The Gordie Howe bridge, owned by the Canadian government and state of Michigan, will connect Detroit and Windsor by linking I-75 and Interstate 96 in Michigan with the new extension of Highway 401 in Ontario.

The Michigan Department of Transportation has acquired more than 600 parcels, including 222 residential parcels, 60 commercial and 26 industrial parcels and 328 other vacant lots for the construction of the bridge, its ramps and plaza, MDOT spokesman Jeff Cranson said.

To date, the state of Michigan has spent about \$65 million on property and about \$60 million relocating residents and businesses with money from Canada.

“The physical landscape of the neighborhood has changed immensely, almost by the day as you drive by there. Most is centered around the bridge,” Schronce said.

Beyond the bridge, he said, there are many “critical assets” nearby including Fort Wayne, the Delray Community Center and area greenways.

In July 2019, the bridge's project team recruited a group of community representatives from the United States and Canada to give input on initiatives from the community benefits plan.

Bridge officials last fall launched the first neighborhood effort under the benefits plan. It includes spending \$50,000 on both sides of the border annually for neighborhoods affected by the bridge's construction. Those eligible can use the funds for community partnerships, landscaping, economic benefits and safety.

"You expect the bridge to be the enemy or the bad guys, and they are so not," Dybis said. "That's the reason why things are getting better. They are actually trying to get money to people who haven't had money in decades."

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